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Shamanism among the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral

From the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia (in 1948)

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As a member of the Third Danish Expedition to Central Asia I spent several months of the spring and summer of 1948 among the Kalash Kafirs of Chitral State in the mountains of the north of West Pakistan. During these months I made the acquaintance of Budok, one of the local shamans, who lived in Bumboret, the largest of the valleys inhabited by the Kalash people. What I learnt of the life, functions and special duties of this shaman may throw some light on the problem of shamanism in the western Himalayas.

There was nothing special about Budok to attract the attention of a foreigner. He was a middle-aged man, who wore the usual Kalash dress and lived with his wife in an ordinary Kalash house. He seemed to live and work like any other adult Kalash who has his fields and flocks of goats to attend to, though it was obvious that he was looked up to by the rest of the village and was treated with special reverence by the other villagers.

The prestige which he thus enjoyed arose from the fact that he was a *dehar*, i.e. a man whom the supernatural powers had endowed with special gifts and who had had special duties laid upon him. Consequently, I was anxious to get to know him and learn more about him. Although he was somewhat shy to begin with, he gradually lost his shyness and became communicative, and when our acquaintanceship was firmly established he did not resent telling me of his life as a *dehar*.

It soon became clear that becoming and being a *dehar* is entirely a matter of a divine call. No man can become a *dehar* without that, and when the call has been received, no further training or education is necessary; thus a newly-called *dehar* does not seek instruction from an old, experienced *dehar*.

Budok stated that he clearly recollected his own call. It had happened about twenty-five years previously (i.e. about 1923), while he attended the celebration of the winter festival at the local shrine of *Mahandeo* at Batrik, a village in the Bumboret Valley. When the celebration had reached the point at which many goats were killed and offered to *Mahandeo*, Budok suddenly lost consciousness and heard voices, sounding as if they came from far away. His own interpretation was

that it was *Mahandeo* who spoke to him, calling him to be a *dehar* for many men and ordering him to perform a great offering on that occasion.

This event marked a turning-point in Budok's life. When a Kalash becomes a *dehar*, his life undergoes a fundamental change. The divine powers have now singled him out from among all other men, and chosen him to be their mouthpiece and intermediary, and they establish a special and intimate contact with him. While any Kalash man may approach the divine powers by bringing them a sacrifice and saying a prayer, the *dehar* is the only person to whom the gods speak directly through his own mouth. Budok said that the gods had done so from the time when they had called him whenever he attended a celebration at a shrine. Furthermore, he said that during a ceremonial offering the *dehar* may sometimes observe strange things which are invisible to ordinary men. Thus he explained that he had occasionally seen something looking like shadows moving above the dead bodies of the sacrificed animals, and he added that more than one *dehar* had made similar observations. He seemed to consider these phenomena as signs of the divine acceptance of the sacrifices.

Consequently, a man who has become a *dehar* is no longer an ordinary man, who can live and behave just like anybody else. As he is a favoured intermediary between the divine world and the human world, he has to a certain extent been drawn out of the sphere of common men and has acquired a status somewhat different from that of his fellow villagers.

It is a well-known fact that numerous indigenous peoples distinguish very sharply between that which is holy and that which is unholy, between the sacred and its opposite, between the clean and the unclean. In many cultures this experience is so strong that it is dangerous for a man to come into too close a contact with any of these qualities unless he is ceremonially prepared for such contact beforehand. In such cultures the ordinary man will therefore take great care to order the activities of his daily life in such a way that he avoids such contact. This is usually done by following a traditional pattern of ordinary behaviour which will lead him safely to his goal without his being exposed to either holy or unholy qualities. This is the case among the Kalash, as may be illustrated by some examples. These examples will also show that the *dehar* must be much more careful in his daily life than the ordinary man.

Every Kalash village has an isolated house built close to the river. This house is reserved for menstruating and childbearing women. Both the house and its surrounding field are unclean, and any man who merely touches the field with his foot will become unclean. Before leaving this house each woman must pass through elaborate ceremonies of purification, and when a woman, who has given birth to a child in the house, returns to her home, her husband must abstain from marital intercourse with her for a period of two to three months. But if the woman is married to a *dehar*, he must observe a period of abstinence for one year. A *dehar* must not visit a house in which there is a woman who has a newborn child. For

Fig. 1.—The Kalash *dehar* Bud

the first month it is so dangerous for him even
other Kalash men will warn him if, by mista
The child must be at least three months old
will be best if he waits visiting it until the chil

From of old chickens and eggs have bee
prohibited to keep and eat chickens and to e
are changing, and the younger generation do
dehar, however, must never violate ancient ru
never eaten a chicken or an egg. He even dec
touched a chicken.

According to ancient belief the Kalash com
who is not unclean, can travel freely about i
carefully avoids violating the rules governin

Chitral proper, and the Moslems living there, are unclean to all members of Kalash society. In order to maintain the purity of the Kalash country there should be no contact at all with this area and its Moslems. But contact cannot be altogether avoided, as some Kalash men have annually to go to Chitral City to work for the Mehtar of Chitral, and some Moslem officials regularly visit the Kalash country. Furthermore, some Moslems have settled in the Kalash country, especially in the Bumboret Valley. As these Moslems profess an alien religion, and do not observe any of the ancient Kalash rules, the Kalash country is continuously being polluted by alien uncleanness.

Even a careful *dehar* cannot avoid this influence completely, and if he has to visit Chitral proper, he must on his return purify himself in order to remove any trace of alien uncleanness. An ordinary man may find it sufficient to take a ritual bath in a river, but as far as a *dehar* is concerned that is entirely insufficient. Instead, he takes one of his goats, summons a friend and two young virgin boys, and then all four repair with the goat to one of the shrines. The boys cleanse their hands and arms meticulously in a rivulet, the goat is killed by cutting its throat, and the two boys hold their hands as bowls under the throat of the goat in order to collect the blood pouring out. When their hands are filled with blood, they sprinkle it rapidly on the face and forehead of the *dehar*, as many times as possible. Fresh and warm blood from a sacrificed animal contains strong powers, which on this occasion serve as a purifying means. At ordinary ceremonies the blood is sprinkled on the shrine.

Owing to the increase of alien influence, both the Kalash country and its people have become subject to a continuous decline in cleanness, and that was the reason, said Budok, why nowadays no *dehar* is as powerful as the ancient ones, and why the number of *dehars* is continuously dwindling. He foresaw a time when there would not be one single *dehar* left among the Kalash. From his point of view this prospect was calamitous, because it meant that the divine powers were withdrawing their gracious call of chosen men to whom the people could turn for supernatural help when danger threatened.

The primary duty of a *dehar* is to bring help to his people when human powers prove of no avail. He can do so, because the divine powers have chosen him, once and for all, to be their intermediary. As far as the *dehar* is concerned, he always endeavours to maintain his connection with the divine powers by avoiding anything unclean and unholy, and by regular *dehar* performances at the three major annual festivals, i.e. the winter solstice festival (*Chaunos*), the spring festival (*Joshi*), and the autumn festival (*Uchau*). On these occasions he becomes unconscious, and the gods speak through his mouth.

The most important duty of a *dehar* is, however, to act as a spiritual doctor when someone is seriously ill. On such occasions the people call the *dehar* in and ask him to ascertain the reason for the disease. For this purpose he orders the sacrifice of a goat, and when the goat has been killed, and while being in an

unconscious state himself, he discovers the so
quently, he gives advice regarding offerings
for the recovery of the patient. On that oc
says a prayer. It is said that such ceremonies

It also occurs that a *dehar* proves to have t
disasters threatening the life of his people a
will illustrate this:

Shortly before my arrival in the Kalas
dream while staying in his goathouse. He ex
cant dreams in his home, because his wife i
him that a typhoid epidemic would soon br
the Rumbur Valley, which is situated a day
where he lived. In the dream the gods ord
Rumbur people that they should make an
order to avert the dangerous epidemic. Wh
necessary information to the Rumbur peo
delayed the prescribed offering, and meanwh
spread, and half a dozen people succumbe
Rumbur requesting Budok to come to their
of the offering ordered.

It is not unusual that a *dehar* gets such
that in former days the gods would not onl
would sometimes appear visually to him.

Budok was commonly said to be an exper
acting their evil influences. A charm may b
words written on it. An evil-doer may hide t
the person whom he wants to injure. Accordi
had never known the use of charms until th
peoples. When summoned to find the cause
ceremony be able to find out that the illness
tell where the charm is hidden, who has put i
offering to avert its evil influence.

I was also told that any *dehar*, during his
on redhot ashes without experiencing any p
burnt, but in other cases they will remain co

When the people in former days went ou
would often accompany the army, encour
victory to the brave.

I have seen Budok become unconscious
attended a funeral ceremony at the meeting
Valley I witnessed a really violent outburst
man was lying in state in the middle of the m

and friends had assembled round it. The funeral ceremonies were protracted and went on for hours on end with dances, dirges, and eulogies succeeding one another. Suddenly a tall man appeared on the scene, and breathless silence descended on the mourners, while they watched his every movement with intense expectation. The tall man was Rota, a famous *dehar*. Turning his face towards the nearby *Mahandeo* and raising his arms ceremonially above his head, he murmured a long prayer. Then his body began to tremble. It was fantastic to observe how the ecstasy gradually took hold of the whole of his body, until he finally in ecstatic rage leapt in among the people. He rushed to the right and to the left, his long arms raining heavy blows on men as well as on women whenever anyone came too close to him. Some men withdrew beyond his reach, some women ran screaming away, but some courageous people, both men and women, approached him cautiously from behind, trying to touch his back. It was difficult because he sometimes turned round with whirlwind speed, and distributed punches and blows to those who did not make good their escape in time. However, some were lucky and succeeded in touching his back with their hands. No sooner had they done so, than they quickly turned round and ran away with a happy look on their faces. It was obvious that they were envied by the others, because by touching him they had come to share some of the supernatural power which manifested its presence in his body through the ecstasy. I was standing with my camera on the edge of the meeting place, but I soon had to retreat hastily because he came dangerously close to me. After about a quarter of an hour the ecstasy was over, he collapsed and lay gasping on the ground until some men carried him away.

This ecstatic performance, probably intended to drive away evil spirits, was obviously peculiar to Rota, for the mourners seemed to await something extraordinary as soon as he appeared. But it is not usual *dehar* behaviour, and Budok said that he himself never became subject to ecstasies when attending funeral ceremonies.

Several other details regarding the Kalash *dehar* might be cited, but the above-mentioned will suffice to convey a general impression of the *dehar*'s importance in Kalash society. However, a few particulars are so interesting that they should be specially mentioned.

Let us first examine the Kalash *dehar* from a functional point of view. His divine call, his social position, his obligations regarding cleanness, his frequent communication with the divine powers, and his manifold duties performed for the benefit of his countrymen, indicate clearly that he is not merely an ordinary person, by chance gifted with extraordinary powers. On the contrary, he is the bearer of a religious institution, whose functions are of vital importance in the whole culture.

This makes it difficult to assume that the *dehar* institution is an innovation or a recent importation from a neighbouring religion. It is so intimately connected with numerous other elements in the Kalash culture that it must date from an

Fig. 2.—The Kalash *dehar* Rota rests after

early time. Some light is thrown upon this
family of the Kalash people. Budok once said
was Nanga *dehar*, who lived during the reign
of the Bumboret Valley. This king was one o
king called Shalak Shah, who had come with h
called "Tsiyam", had invaded Chitral prope
of the history of this king with what is know
that this Kalash rule of Chitral proper should
1500 A.D. This means that Nanga *dehar* m
1500 and 1600, and consequently the *dehar* ins
at least as old as that.

An examination of the ancient Kalash tr

of the people before the conquest of Chitral indicates the following route of migration (here given in reverse order): the Kunar River, some places near the River Pech, and presumably Waigel, where the Kalash lived for some generations. Before coming to Waigel it seems that they lived in the unknown country "Tsiyam", probably situated farther to the south.

We may therefore conclude that before 1500 A.D. the Kalash lived in contact with the mediaeval indigenous cultures of North-Western India, and that they probably belong to this culture sphere. This point of view is strongly supported by the fact that their language, called Kalasha, is a purely Indian language, in many ways related to Khowar. Probably both languages belong to the first wave of Indo-Aryan immigrants from the south.

However, a detailed analysis will be necessary before it is possible to account for the character and origin of the individual traits which make up the total complex of the Kalash *dehar* institution. Taken as a whole it may be said that the evidence points to its representing a type of shamanism related to the shamanism of India and of Central Asia. In this connection the *betan* of the Chitralis as well as the religion of the Nuristan Kafirs have also to be taken into account.

When now we compare what we know of the shamanism of these Asian areas with the Kalash *dehar* institution, the latter seems to lack some important traits which are generally characteristic of shamanism. It might therefore be suggested that it would be more correct to classify the *dehar* as an ecstatic prophet rather than as a shaman. In support of that one might point out that the Kalash *dehar* lacks so characteristic a shaman implement as a drum. But this argument is not decisive because the drum is almost always absent in the shamanism of Central and Northern India.

The present article would, however, become far too long were I to attempt to discuss these intricate problems here, and a detailed discussion of them will have to wait until I publish all the material I collected while staying with the Kalash Kafirs. In the last resort the question of what constitutes shamanism may perhaps be said to be a question of definition. Moreover, although our present knowledge of the Kalash *dehar* illuminates some not unimportant aspects of the whole office, it is certainly not exhaustive, and for the time being many problems must remain unsolved, simply due to lack of knowledge. But reconsidering the above-mentioned facts as a whole, it seems to me that the Kalash *dehar* institution has so many traits in common with what is generally called shamanism that it is reasonable to classify the *dehar* as a shaman.

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operation as interpreter for me, and I wish also to re
mant, the late Mohammed Isa, for his kind assistance.

Further information on my field work among th
preliminary report "Ethnological Field-Research in C
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no. 2 (Copenhagen, 1956), pp. 12–35.

As for the general discussion of shamanism I may
niques Archaïques de l'Extase" by Mircea Eliade, Pa
the same author's article "Recent Works on Shamani
vol. 1, no. 1 (1961), pp. 152–186, especially pp. 175 ff.

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